

May the Schwartz Be With You

By Karen Green

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Columbia University: *finally* making it into the big time, baby. Al Jaffee is coming here to speak!



Yes, folks, thanks to the intellectual fortitude of the good people at Columbia's Institute for Israel and Jewish Studies (IIJS), Al Jaffee will be coming to 501 Schermerhorn Hall on Wednesday, December 9th, at 8 PM, for a conversation with Danny Fingeroth. And, yes, you're all invited. Mark your calendars now!

So why should Columbia provide a venue for Jaffee? What are his contributions to *belles lettres* and the liberal arts? I shouldn't have to tell you: these past couple of years have been jam-packed with publicity for Jaffee, what with an article in the New York Times (complete with interactive fold-in feature); an interview for NY1's One on 1 with Budd Mishkin; a panel at the 2009 MoCCA Fest, with Arnold Roth, in honor of the release of the *Humbug* anthology—and, oh, what a raconteur that Roth is; let me tell you—with that release following hot on the heels of the 2008 re-release of Jaffee's *Tall Tales*, with a foreword by none other than Stephen Colbert.

But there's a very good reason that the sponsoring organization is the IIJS, since Jaffee's

work in many ways epitomizes the Jewish contribution to American popular culture. From Eddie Cantor (Israel Iskowitz) to Fanny Brice (Fania Borach) to Al Jolson (Asa Yoelson) to the Marx Brothers (Julius, Adolf, Leonard, and sometimes Milton) to George Burns (Nathan Birnbaum) to Jack Benny (Benjamin Kubelsky) to Irving Berlin (Israel Isidor Baline) to Samuel Goldwyn (Schmuel Gelbfisz) to Mel Brooks (Melvin Kaminsky) to Woody Allen (Allan Konigsberg) to Jon Stewart (Jonathan Stuart Leibowitz), the Jewish sensibility and sense of humor has permeated our culture to such an extent that many people may not even recognize it as Jewish. It's just humor.

As a reviewer put it while discussing Paul Buhle's *From the Lower East Side to Hollywood: Jews in American Popular Culture*, "Yiddishkeit"—Jewishness—informed "a savvy, self-deprecating, irreverent, mocking, sarcastic, lively, and intuitive humor" (appropriate for a people whose relationship even with their God is characterized by argument, debate, and wit). Not to mention perfect timing:



Nurse # 1: Now, don't be impatient! Dr. Kirby will be here in a few minutes.

Eddie Cantor: *[sitting up]* Dr. Kirby? Listen -

Nurse # 1: *[pushing him back on gurney]* Down!

Eddie Cantor: *[sitting up]* You don't understand!

Nurse # 2: *[pushing him back on gurney]* Down!

Eddie Cantor: *[sitting up]* This is all a mistake!

Nurse # 2: *[pushing him back on gurney]* Down!

Eddie Cantor: *[flailing his legs and sobbing]* Oh-hoh-hoh-hoh-hoh!

Nurse # 3: *[as all three hold down his legs]* And don't kick!

Eddie Cantor: *[sitting up]* I always kick on the fourth down.

— Thank Your Lucky Stars (1943)

The funny Jews who worked on stage, in radio and in the movies, crafted rapid-fire, minimalist, wise-cracking repartee that dominated the culture; even pugnacious Irish movie star James Cagney spoke Yiddish in a couple of his films, such as *Lady Killer* and *Taxi!* (for the latter, see 1:30-2:50 here), a language he'd learned growing up in Manhattan's immigrant neighborhoods. Immersion in Jewish culture and humor was easy in New York City, of course, but the ubiquitous nature of this *yiddishe* humor in popular culture provided a safe cultural space for Jews stranded far from traditional centers of *Yiddishkeit* like the Lower East Side.

Groucho: And all along the river...all along the river, those are all levees.

Chico: That's the Jewish neighborhood?
Groucho: (pause) Well, we'll Passover that...
— The Cocoanuts (1929)



Jewish humor didn't have to come out of Jewish faces, though often it did so unbeknownst to the audience: *videsuave* Melvyn Douglas (Melvyn Hesselberg), silky Ricardo Cortez (Jacob Krantz), menacing Edward G. Robinson (Emmanuel Goldenberg), still more menacing Peter Lorre (László Löwenstein). But more often it would be WASPier talent that would fire off those wisecracks like machine-gun shells, in obedience to the classic screenwriter maxim, "Write Yiddish, cast British." Laughing at the rapid wit of more ethnically-acceptable actors such as Cary Grant (Archibald Leach), Carole Lombard (Joan Peters), or Bette Davis (Ruth Davis) may have been the spoonful of sugar that helped the chicken fat go down.

Some historians have claimed that Jewish emigrés' unease with the necessary compromises of assimilation led to an over-identification with American culture, a desire to contribute to that culture in order to be considered firmly on the "white" side of the color barrier. Perhaps. Joan Rivers (Joan Molinsky) has offered a different take on it, observing that comedy "is a medium for revenge. We can deflate and punish the pomposity and the rejection which hurt us. Comedy is power. We can be in control." For a group that may have felt otherwise powerless, this could be heady stuff.

Now, you'll notice still I haven't even mentioned Jews in the comics. There are a score or more of books that have covered that ground better than ever I could, and if I started on the topic we'd be here all week. But I will note that the first Jewish artist to break into newspaper strips was Harry Hershfield, whose "Abie the Agent" recounted the adventures of a Jewish salesman, as in this 1917 example:

Abie the Agent

There Was Something Abie Had Overlooked.

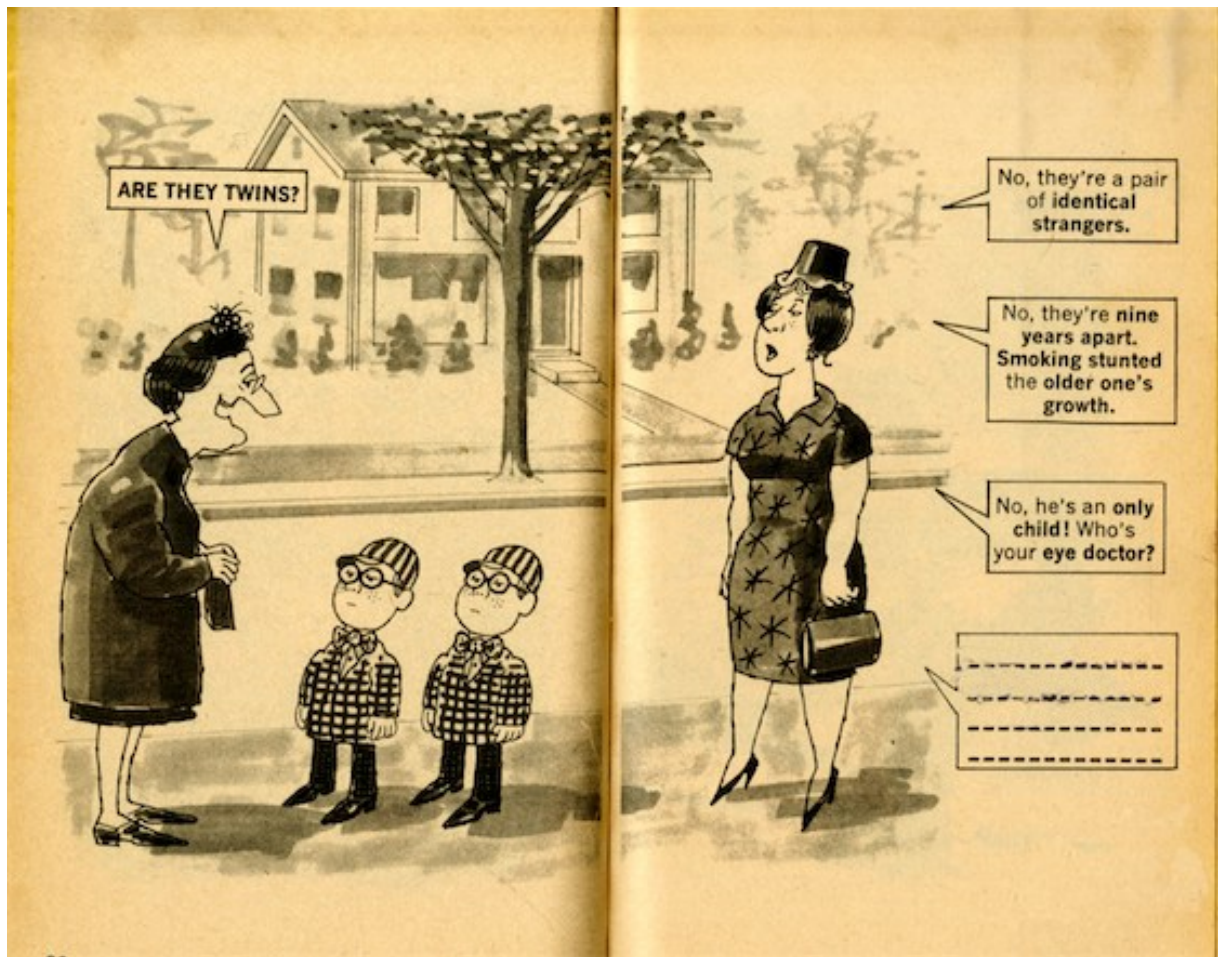


The cadences of Yiddish speech were heavy in "Abie the Agent," but the Jewish influence in comics reached its true apotheosis in the one, the only, the meshugena *MAD Magazine*.

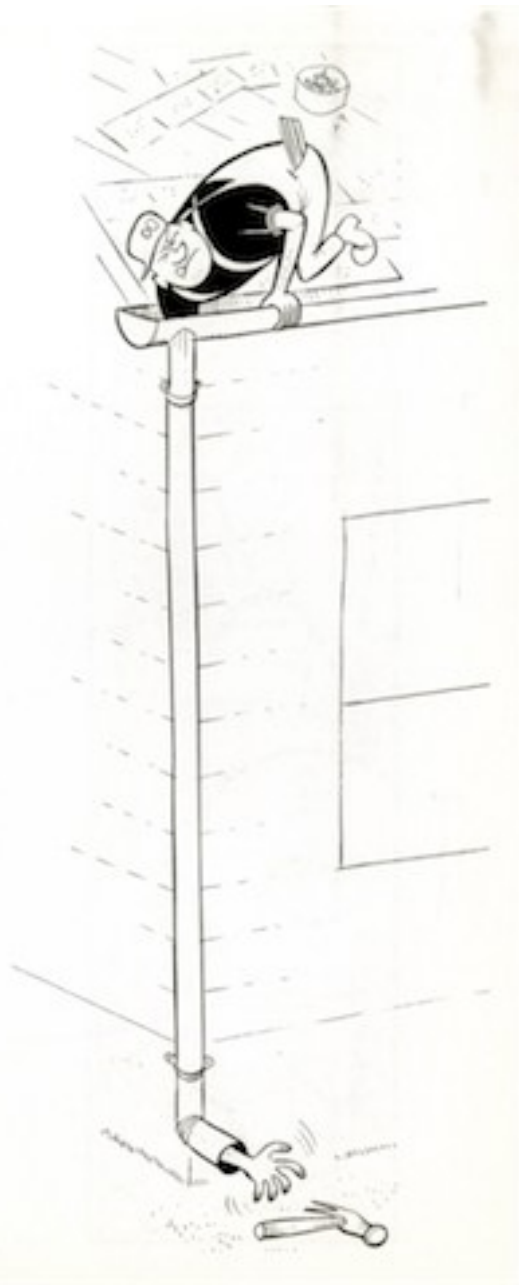


The combined talents of that usual gang of idiots, Harvey Kurtzman, Will Elder (Wolf Eisenberg), Jaffee and even a few *goyim*, helped shape the subversive humor of *MAD Magazine*. From "furshlugginer" to "What, Me Worry?" to "I was raised on chicken fat!" this was New York Jewish humor at its purest. It was the sensibility of *MAD* that allowed, for example, a little Jewish girl in a small town in Michigan (ahem), to feel part of a kind of universal secular *Yiddishkeit*. Thanks to that pervasive humor, all the world's a *shtetl*—or, at the very least, Delancey Street.

Jaffee was responsible for two of *MAD*'s longest-running and essential features: the fold-in and "Snappy Answers to Stupid Questions." When I spoke to Professor Jeremy Dauber, the director of the IJJS, about his reasons for inviting Jaffee to speak, he observed, "If one of the paths that American Jewish comedy—which is in some way to say a significant part of American comedy—took was the manic, loose-limbed energy of the smart-aleck, where majority culture was held up to ridicule by those in the minority, in any sense of the word, you couldn't do better than *MAD Magazine*."



Dauber went on to remark that Jaffee's "Snappy Answers to Stupid Questions" encapsulated both the magazine's comic sensibility—anything and everything for a laugh—and the Jewish comic fecundity that could produce wisecrack after wisecrack: in this case, with not a single crack going to waste. When I mentioned that reading the feature creates in its audience a kind of vicarious *esprit d'escalier*—the brilliant comeback one thinks of after leaving the party—Dauber noted that this is in fact a phenomenon of Jewish humor as well; in fact, the good folks at Wikipedia tell me that there's even a Yiddish word for it: *Trepverter*. Who knew?

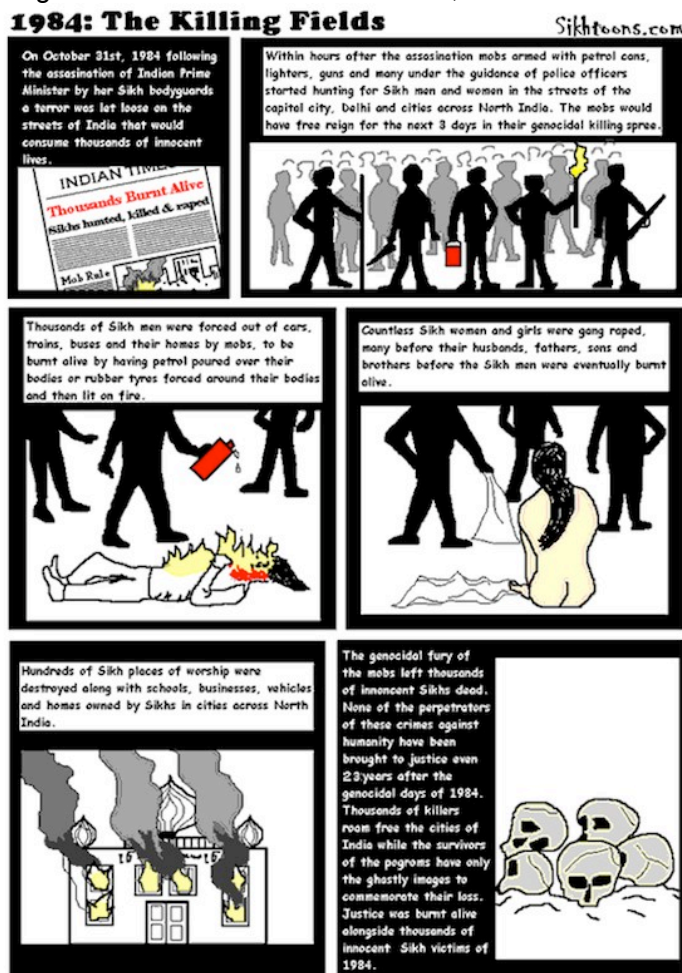


"Tall Tales," Jaffee's comic feature that ran from 1957 to 1962, represents both the Jewish humorist's ability to pare a joke down to its essentials and also what those good Jewish *boychiks* Arthur Laurents, Stephen Sondheim, and Jule Styne noted in the musical "Gypsy": you gotta have a gimmick. Jaffee explains in the preface to the recent edition that it was tough to break onto the newspaper funny pages, since adding a new strip meant bumping an old one. So he offered to fill in space that had gone unused—see? economical!—and proposed a vertical strip which could fit on any page where an editor wanted a little pizzazz. The one thing that perhaps makes "Tall Tales" less typically Jewish in its humor was Jaffee's decision to make every strip wordless, abandoning the wordplay so dear to the Tribe and relying heavily on slapstick. Slapstick, of course, was actually invented

by the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, but Jewish comedians have long embraced it warmly and the sight gag—the "double take" as Jaffee described his gag strategy—holds an honored place in the comic repertoire.

So, anyway, to sum up all of the above: of course, Al Jaffee (Al Jaffee) deserves to come speak at Columbia. See you on Wednesday? Feh, we should live so long!

Moving from one high-profile but misunderstood ethnic group to a lower-profile and misunderstood ethnic group, let me take this brief opportunity to describe an extraordinary exhibition I went to in late November. Vishavjit Singh, a Sikh cartoonist here in New York, sent me an invitation to the opening of a show of his cartoons about the 1984 massacre of Indian Sikhs, in the wake of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination at the hands of two of her Sikh bodyguards. Singh's style is spare and clean, and his pen is acid-tipped; I learned an enormous amount about a culture of which I knew very little. The cartoons were hung to create a continuous narrative, with



the wall captions providing additional context. It was basically like a graphic novel diorama. Check out his site, Sikhtoons, for yourselves.

Image credits:

Humbug staff, *Humbug* (Fantagraphics, 2008), vol. 1, p. 186

Snappy Answers to Stupid Questions (Warner Books, 1974), p. 96-97

Tall Tales (Abrams, 2008), p. 93

Karen Green is Columbia University's Ancient/Medieval Studies Librarian and Graphic Novel selector.

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